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ABSTRACT

If individuals react to realities in the environment in accord with societal norms, instructional strategies in writing must be devised with the learner in mind. Teachers of writing must be interested in the social realities surrounding their students as well as the level of intuitive development attained by them. Opportunities should be provided for groups of students to solve verbal problems in the classroom, for this will enhance their abilities to conceptualize personal ideas. Small and large group discussions prior to the completion of a writing assignment will allow students to test their hypotheses as they seek verifications. As the students' reactions to external events change as their perspectives change, teachers should ask the same questions and give the same assignments more than once. Too, if human beings have a creative capacity to represent reality to themselves, writing is a behavior which allows a part of the word to become a part of the personality. The fluid relationship between students' personalities and environmental realities is the ingredient which elaborates their perceptions as it creates an interplay between subjective and objective thought. (HOD)

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What I Write is Who I Am

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What I Write is Who I Am

Writing is at once retrospective, introspective and experiential. In contemplating ideas, writers view in retrospect all those past experiences which impinge upon the present moment. The thoughts which flow from retrospection become a foundation for introspection which allow writers to reflect upon present states of mind. As past experiences are assimilated with a present awareness, writers are able to place ideas in a contemporary perspective. Writing, however, does not end there; writers must also envision a future and the effect of their ideas on audiences known and unknown. Furthermore, writers are surrounded by cultural environments which have fostered personal experiences that affect their perceptions of themselves in those environments. Writing, therefore, is a complicated process of synthesizing past, present and future interpretations of reality as presented by an external environment.

English teachers have been charged with the responsibility of developing students' capabilities in writing. Often this appears to be an awesome task for each student is at a different point on the continuum of development. All students, nevertheless, are products of a world beyond the school and they have devised various means of coping with the realities in that world.

The academic world, as real as any other, places further external and internal demands on students. These demands are usually different in kind from those found in the informal environment and appropriate coping techniques are needed. Writing, however, is one technique that students can use to survive in the academic world as well as in their personal lives. Because it is a means of organizing and interpreting experiences in accord with one's intuitive instincts, written language is capable of spanning both horizons. The writer's personality is a key factor in this process for verbal reactions, regardless of their future destinations, originate in the self concepts and social identities of writers.

Self concept refers to subjective reality. It is the perception of oneself in relation to the objective reality in the environment. Closely allied with self concept is the aspect of social identity. Indeed, it might be said that self concept answers the question, "who am I?" while social identity answers the question, "what am I?" The search for identity is a representation of experiences in a particular culture and the self concept is that which is formed individually as a result of those experiences. Self concept and social identity do not exist as separate entities; one is a reflection of the other and together they help to form the human personality.

The study of personality is the concern of the psychologist rather than the English teacher. However, since writing is so reflective of students' personalities, it is important for English teachers to interest themselves in this dynamic aspect of development. An improved understanding of students' personalities may well be the key which teachers can use to help students unlock and release their internal analyses of themselves in the academic world. Once revealed, English teachers can use these personal and private interpretations of reality as tools for improving students' abilities in writing.

Erik Erikson and George Kelly have written at length about the human personality. Their psychological theories stem from different vantage points and are far more dissonant than they are similar. There are instances, however, where agreement can be found and used as implications for writing behavior. It is for this reason that they have been chosen as the foundation of this discussion. Because of the breadth of these theoretical perspectives, some limitations have to be imposed. Therefore, I have selected two principles which are central tenets in the theories of Kelly and Erikson. An attempt will be made to relate these principles to writing methodology.

The first principle: <u>The personality evolves as a result of environmental stimulation</u>.

Erikson advances the theory that personality is an evolutionary process emanating from a series of biological, psychological and social phenomena in the environment. He identifies eight developmental stages that span the life cycle and in each of these stages, a central problem or crisis confronts the individual and becomes the dominant dilemma of that stage. The problem has its beginnings in earlier stages and culminates in subsequent stages. As the individual matures, new possibilities for solutions occur, but the resolutions made during previous periods persist and may continue to have influence. Hence the personality is constantly in a state of becoming. Erikson says: (we) "fall apart repeatedly and unlike Humpty Dumpty grow together again." [1]

George Kelly's theory, called a psychology of personal constructs, analyzes the way in which human beings represent reality to themselves. He does not distinguish one stage of development from the other, but his emphasis on the constant interaction of personalities with realities in the environment is consonant with Erikson's beliefs. According to Kelly, the solution of external problems depends upon the internal representation imposed by the person. Thus, for Kelly, the environment provides an unending source of events to be construed but the construction process is uniquely personal.

Kelly believes that all human beings ultimately seek to predict and control the environment. Thus, they are scientists in the true sense of the word. In accord with this perspective, the world can be called a personal laboratory in which human beings hypothesize and seek alternatives to verify their perceptions of external events. Kelly calls these perceptions "constructs" and he refers to the process of construct selection as "constructive alternativism." In his words:

> Man looks at his world through transparent patterns or templates which he he creates and then attempts to fit over the realities of which the world is composed. The fit is not always very good. Yet, without such patterns, the world appears to be such an undifferentiated homogeneity that man is unable to make any sense out of it.[2]

Kelly reasons that the ideas that persons form as they construe events are as real as the events themselves. A person knows reality only as events are interpreted. Indeed, according to his theory, it is the nature of human beings to construe and reconstrue events - not to attain satisfaction for inner drives. He emphatically states:

> In our assumptive structure, we do not specify nor do we imply that a person seeks "pleasures," that he has special "needs," that there are "rewards" or even that there are "satisfactions." To our way of thinking, there is a continuing movement toward the anticipation of events, rather than a series of barters for temporal satisfactions and this movement is the essence of human life itself.[3]

Unlike Kelly, Erikson identifies an internal emotional apparatus which guides the interaction of the person with the environment. Growth, however, does not depend on this apparatus alone; growth occurs as a result of a combination of internal drives and external stimulations. Erikson posits that "a human being....is at all times an organism, an ego and member of society and is involved in all these processes of organization."[4]

We can extend these theoretical perspectives to the writing behavior of students because all students are involved in a process of development and are continually faced with crises or problems. Whether the problem is an assignment, an examination or a situation concerning interpersonal relationships, it must be resolved before students are able to progress to a new developmental level. The nature of the problem will determine whether a written product is required. In any case, writing can help students to shape, organize and hypothesize about the problem in an effort to solve it.

To begin the organization, the problem must be internalized. The process of

internalization demands that the new reality be matched with prior experiences. If a reference point can be found at which the new reality corresponds with something previously experienced, the objective reality in the environment can be exposed to a subjective analysis. If no reference point can be found, the problem may be more difficult to solve because the students have no available means of relating to it. It will not fit into their ideological "construction system" to use Kelly's terms. In order to find a solution, the construction system must be "overhauled." In other words, the students must accommodate or construe the new reality so that it can be fused into the system. According to Kelly:

> The construction one places upon events are working hypotheses which are about to be put to the test of experience. As one's anticipations or hypotheses are successively revised in the light of the unfolding sequence of events, a construction system undergoes a progressive evolution.[5]

If the purpose of writing is to complete an assignment or prepare for an examination, students must anticipate a reaction that they hope to invoke in the reader (in this case the teacher) and incorporate the flavor of this anticipation into the words they record on the page.

On the other hand, if the problem is of an interpersonal nature, the students may not be interested in an acceptable final product. This writing is purely personal and will not be shared. The purpose, in this case, is to release inner thoughts for once they are verbalized in written language, they can be viewed objectively. They can also be controlled. Writers are the masters of what they write; the same degree of control is not possible with random thoughts . Control is an important factor in the solution of problems.

The personalities of students naturally affect both of these processes but while the personality is distinctly individual, personal reactions are colored by experiences gained through social interaction. Kelly says that if two or more persons have similar experiences, it is possible that they will construe these ex-

periences in the same way. Erikson postulates that individuals react to realities in the environment in accord with societal norms. Their behaviors are conditioned by sanctions they have learned from relatives and peers. Thus, students respond to reality in terms of their inner spirits - their hopes, dreams and aspirations which originate out of a culture. They are socially responsible to this culture and words portend their convictions as social group members. The ultimate response that is given to a verbal problem reflects students' perceptions of themselves in the midst of these intervening environments.

Therefore, instructional strategies in writing must be devised with the learner in mind. Teachers of writing must be interested in the social realities surrounding their students as well as the level of intuitive development attained by them. In planning learning experiences, teachers may not know a great deal about individual students' interpretations of reality. If, however, students are viewed as members of a social group who have experienced some of the same kinds of objective realities, it is possible to point instructional procedures in a direction which can maximize the benefits of individual subjective experiences. Opportunities should be provided for groups of students to solve verbal problems in the classroom for this will enhance their abilities to conceptualize personal ideas. Various kinds of small and large group discussions prior to the completion of a writing assignment will allow students to test hypotheses as they seek verifications. From the discussion, the teacher as observer, can learn much about each students' personal reaction to the task at hand.

According to Kelly, individuals learn as they revise. From this it can be inferred that students' reactions to external events change as their perspectives change. With the acquisition of new knowledge, alert students see more possible avenues of application. To create this diversity in application, teachers should ask the same questions and give the same assignments more than once. This may be

accomplished by having students read a selection and apply a written interpretation at the beginning of the term. The same assignment is given at the end of the term. If Kelly's hypothesis is correct, the students' reactions will be quite different even though the assignment is the same. In the course of the semester, students will revise many of their constructs as they engage in the process of assimilating new realities. A good question or a good assignment gets better with each attempt to answer or complete it.

The second principle: <u>All human beings have a creative capacity to represent reality to themselves</u>.

Central to the ideas of Kelly and Erikson is the exaltation of the human personality as the director of behavior. Both of these theorists agree that though it is in the external environment that problems occur, there is within the person a creative capacity to deal with those challenges.

For Kelly, this innate attribute grows out of the freedom that persons possess to represent reality. He clearly explains that individuals do not simply respond to events, but have a creative capacity to represent them. The representations are ways of perceiving reality and are always made in view of past constructions. This does not mean that a person is bound to interpretations of the past. Because it is possible to predict a future, the person is free to alter past constructions and form a completely new interpretation. The element of choice which springs from anticipation is a strong concept in Kellian theory. Indeed, the fundamental postulate on which Kelly built his theory states that "a person's processes are psychologically channelized by the way in which he anticipates events."[6] The anticipation is orginally internal but it can become externalized through the use of hypothetical thought which is expressed in language.

As Kelly sees it, the language of hypothesis is a "human device for anticipating events - an instrument for probing the future and at the same time maintaining

composure in the face of on-rushing events."[7] The language of hypothesis is not confirming; it is anticipatory. Therefore, it relieves a person of the boredom of contentment and satisfaction and provides an excitement of expectancy.

To further elaborate his point, Kelly uses an example. Upon observation, a person can state that "the floor is hard." This is a statement of fact which is unalterable as it stands. The verb is placed in an imperative mood. If the verb is changed and the transformation places the verb in what Kelly calls the invitational mood, the sentence becomes: "Suppose we regard the floor as hard." Kelly says that in this case, "the idea of the floor as being hard is not imposed upon ...from without nor is it isolated from external evidence as a phenomenological proposition would be, but is one that can be pursued, tested, abandoned or reconsidered at a later time."[8] It is this unlimited freedom to construe events that allow individuals to make creative interpretations.

Erikson also believes that the presonality interacts directly with the external environment though his hypothesis differs from Kelly's. In Erikson's view, the "history of humanity is a gigantic metabolism of individual life cycles."[9] He perceives the external world as an extension of the many personalities that inhabit it for each personality absorbs the world as it experiences reality.

If one holds with Erikson, it can be reasoned that writing is a behavior which allows a part of the world to become a part of the personality. In order for writers to internalize reality, they must interpret it in terms of who they are and what they believe. The interpretation becomes a part of the personality and thus influences the written word. This fluid relationship between students' personalities and environmental realities is the ingredient which elaborates their perceptions as it creates an interplay between subjective and objective thought.

Conclusion

The application of these theories to writing methodology requires that students

are able to engage in a process of abstraction. Their developmental level naturally affects their ability to employ this process. However, the ability is fostered or strengthened only if teachers are aware of the profound effect that personality has on students' writing performance and plan instruction in accord with this awareness. Experiences in the English classroom should be more than activities. They should be transactions with objective realities arising out of problem situations. The situations, contrived by the teacher or untouched by human hands, must form a link to students' pasts as they build a bridge to the future. Writing assignments should be selected for their ability to strike a responsive chord for when students write as a result of total immersion into real life experiences, they become more receptive to instructional intervention. This opens the door for teachers to effect change in their behavior.

Notes

1. Henry W. Maier. Three Theories of Child Development: The Contributions of Erik H. Erikson, Jean Piaget and Robert R. Sears. New York: Harper and Row, Inc., 1965. p. 29.

2. George A. Kelly. A Theory of Personality: The Psychology of Personal Constructs. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1955. p.8.

3. Ibid., p. 68

4. Henry W. Maier. p. 21

5. George A. Kelly. p.72

6. Ibid., p.46

7. George A. Kelly. "The Language of Hypothesis: Man's Psychological Instrument." Journal of Individual Psychology, 20, November, 1964. p. 137

8. Ibid., p. 139.

9. Erik H. Erikson. Chidhood and Society. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1963. p.16.